

University of Illinois victimizes professor critical of Israel's policies

By Kristina Betinis
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On September 11, the University of Illinois Board of Trustees voted 8-1 to reject the appointment of Professor Steven Salaita to the American Indian Studies department. A job offer approved by Salaita's colleagues was revoked last month by University Chancellor Phyllis Wise after Salaita's social media commentaries against the Israeli government's policies were publicized.

The university's position was expressed in a hypocritical statement by President Robert Easter: "In our pluralistic society it is increasingly obvious that forward progress is impeded by polarization, bigotry and hurtful dialogue that inhibits reasoned discourse. I've come to the conclusion that Professor Salaita's approach indicates that he would be incapable of fostering a classroom environment where conflicting opinions need to be given equal consideration regardless of the issue being discussed. I'm also concerned that his irresponsible public statements would make it more difficult for the university and particularly the Urbana-Champaign campus to attract the best and brightest students, faculty and staff."

According to university emails, University President Robert Easter notified Chancellor Wise of Salaita's "uncivil" speech, after receiving an email from an alumnus about Salaita's appointment.

Salaita's rejection raises a number of issues regarding academic freedom, as well as calling into question shared governance between university department faculty and state administrators.

Several protests have been staged by University of Illinois students and faculty since the start of the fall semester, and a number of academic departments have voted "no confidence" in the university leadership. Robert Warrior, director of the American Indian Studies program at the University of Illinois, said,

"'Civility' is the new banner of what is expected on college campuses and it's a frightening reality for those of us who have to figure out what it is to teach under that banner flying over our campuses."

Last month, the Modern Language Association condemned the university's decision in a letter to Wise. More than 5,000 academics and scholars internationally have signed a letter pledging to boycott the university.

The University of Illinois Jewish community also issued a letter in support of Salaita's hiring and against the University of Illinois's decision, which stated, "By conflating pointed and justified critique of the Israeli state with anti-Semitism, your administration is effectively disregarding a large and growing number of Jewish perspectives that oppose Israeli military occupation, settler expansion, and the assault on Palestine. We did not survive ethnic cleansing and carry on the legacy of our people to have our existence used to justify the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, or their unethical treatment when they speak out against the murder, violence, and displacement of their own people."

On September 9, Salaita spoke at the University of Illinois to appeal the University of Illinois Board of Trustees' decision to rescind a job offer to him, based on controversy over his political views and under some amount of pressure from wealthy donors to the university.

In fact, Salaita's social media statements reflected the broad anger and revulsion at the 2014 Israeli siege on Gaza. That Salaita's views are not controversial was expressed by one dissenting University of Illinois board member, attorney James Montgomery, on September 11.

Montgomery, who had previously supported

Chancellor Wise's decision to rescind the job offer to Salaita in late August, said after the vote, "My duty as a trustee is to look out for what is in my view the best interest of the university, not my own sensibilities or the sensibilities of other people. It's a slippery slope when you start judging speech based on the manner of speech and not the content."

In his statement of September 9 appealing to the university to hire him, Salaita said, "Chancellor Wise and the Board of Trustees said that the University administration found the tone of my tweets 'uncivil' and raised questions about my ability to inhabit the University environment. This is a perilous standard that risks eviscerating the principle of academic freedom. My comments were not made in a classroom or on campus; they were made through my personal Twitter account.

"The University's policing and judgment of those messages places any faculty member at risk of termination if University administrators deem the tone or content of his or her speech 'uncivil' without regard to the forum or medium in which the speech is made. This is a highly subjective and sprawling standard that can be used to attack faculty who espouse unpopular or unconventional ideas. Even more troubling are the documented revelations that the decision to terminate me is a result of pressure from wealthy donors—individuals who expressly dislike my political views."

University of Illinois leaders have defended the decision to fire Salaita. In a public statement, University of Illinois Board of Trustees chairman Christopher Kennedy (of the Kennedy dynasty) said, "It's absolutely clear that we could not bring Salaita onto this campus. We cannot endorse that behavior. I don't believe there's anybody with an open mind who cannot be convinced we did the right thing, ethically and procedurally."

Kennedy also denied that the board's rejection of Salaita violates the shared governance agreement, stating, "That is a huge issue: Did we violate the academic autonomy of a unit? Absolutely not. Did we violate someone's tenure? I don't know how we can violate someone's tenure if we never gave it to someone."

About Salaita's tweets, Kennedy said, "There can be no place for that in our democracy, and therefore, there

will be no place for it in our university."

Salaita's case has been taken up by the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) with a Chicago law firm, Loevy & Loevy. CCR's summary of the case states, "Salaita's termination, which functions as a penalty for his speech on an issue of public concern, constitutes 'viewpoint discrimination,' a violation of the First Amendment, and also threatens academic freedom by punishing a faculty member for speaking as a citizen on a critical issue."

CCR is currently bringing 19 cases against the Obama administration and its officials for violations of constitutional and human rights.

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